



# Personalization in the public sector An inventory of organizational and user obstacles towards personalization of electronic services in the public sector

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## Abstract

The public sector more and more deploys personalized e-government services. Personalization offers great opportunities to make communication more effective and efficient, to infer and predict citizens' behavior and to even influence behavior. However, some drawbacks must be considered. Important organizational barriers hinder the implementation of personalized e-government services and important user obstacles, such as access, trust, control, and privacy, have to be overcome to make fruitful use of those personalized e-government services.

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## 1. Introduction

Personalized electronic government services (in here referred to as “personalized e-gov. services”) are supposed to give public organizations tremendous possibilities for their e-government strategies. Fully personalized e-government portals, for example, should

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provide citizens with exactly those services they need, supposedly increasing citizen satisfaction levels. A personalized e-gov. service helps in making communication more effective and efficient, inferring and predicting citizens' behavior and even influencing it, in order to make citizens abide by the law. However, governments face a number of obstacles when engaging in personalization. This paper tries to give an overview of the most important obstacles for personalization as they appear from theory and practice, empirical studies and real-world examples. We divide the obstacles in two categories: organizational obstacles and user obstacles. The organizational obstacles are the internal obstacles governments have to deal with while implementing personalized electronic government services. The user obstacles are the obstacles user face when engaging in personalized e-services.

Governments should have an interest in taking away user obstacles for all citizens. First reason for this is the fact that personalized services in its potency can help achieving specific organizational goals that are very interesting to governments. The second reason is even more important. In contrast to private organizations, governments have to treat each citizen on an equal basis. Businesses can afford to simply ignore less-valued customers. Governments cannot make this decision and should therefore put considerable effort in taking away the user obstacles.

This article is organized in four sections. First the concepts of personalization are discussed in more detail and some potential benefits are discussed. The second section discusses the organizational obstacles, whereas the third section focuses on the user obstacles. In the final section of the paper, some conclusions will be drawn and suggestions for future research will be given.

## **2. Personalization**

From the user's perspective, the potential benefit of an e-service is not realized when organizations treat each contact as if it were a first-time contact, requiring individual data as if they were not already provided on earlier occasions. Also, from the user's perspective, e-services are particularly efficient for contacts with sets of organizations or departments within organizations that in the user's opinion have a common goal or interest in the user. For example, for an impaired citizen who is moving to a new hometown, the request for a special parking permit is part of a "scenario" of moving from one town to another. That scenario also includes activities such as registering with the municipality and finding out about waste collection times at the new address. Although these services might be offered by different departments or even by different organizations, the citizen will perceive them as part of one "event" and might easily become frustrated if having to perform the entire scenario, and provide the specific data, over and over again. Re-use of data collected or provided on earlier occasions strengthens the relationship between user and organization (van der Geest, van Dijk, Pieterse, 2005).

For organizations, personalization is a means to restore the traditional personal relationship of, for example, shop owners with their neighborhood customers, in contemporary social and technological forms. Building personal relationships occurs in the last stage of the evolving

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